BACK TRACK

Slash Chording

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SLASH CHORDS PROVIDE A FUN, quick, and musical way to escape the harmonic doldrums. We first touched on these kaleidoscopic voicings in the Sept. '99 Back Track. In this lesson, we'll look at three slash-chord applications, take a shot at improvising over a slash-chord progression, and then learn how to generate slash chords from scratch.

First, a review: In its simplest form, a slash chord is a triad played over a non-root bass note—*C*/*D*, *Em*/*D*♭, or *F*/*B*♭, for example. The chord comes first, followed by the bass note. To verbally reference a slash chord, simply say, "*C* over *D*," "*F* over *B*♭," and so on.

You can find slash chords in all styles of music—from James Taylor to Jim Hall to Jimi Hendrix. And the best news? If you've been diligently practicing your triads, you'll discover dozens of delightful new sounds by simply pairing a familiar triad with a new bass note. Let's examine ways you can put slash chords to work in your music.

Highlighting bass lines. Slash chords come in handy when you want to roll out a bass line below static harmony, as shown in **Ex. 1**. In this case, a *C-B-B*♭*-B* line moves below a repeated *Dm* arpeggio. This type of progression occurs frequently in rock, folk, and country.

A triad-plus-bass slash chord can often be expressed as a four-note chord with the bass note as its root (and many four-note chords can be translated into slash chords). In this example, *Dm*/*B* (voiced here as *B-F-A-D*) contains the same tones as *Bm7*♭*5*. Likewise, bar 2's *Dm*/*B*♭ (*B*♭*-F-A-D*) can be interpreted as *B*♭*maj7*. However, if we describe our two-bar progression as a *Dm/C, Bm7*♭*5, B*♭*maj7, Bm7*♭*5* passage, we lose sight of its essence—a bass line moving against *Dm*. This proves how in many instances, a progression's true nature is best expressed using slash chords. Revisit some of your progressions with this in mind; perhaps by using slash chords to interpret a section of the harmony you'll see it in a new light.

Exposing pedal-tone action. Slash chords are also useful when you want to illustrate harmonic motion over a pedal tone—a sustained or repeating note. **Ex. 2** shows *B*♭ and *F* triads played on the fourth, third, and second strings over a repeating *G* (sixth string). If you were to play the first chord (*G-F-B*♭*-D*) in isolation, no doubt you'd think of it as *Gm7*. But as in the previous example, the harmonic nature of this progression—shifting triads over a repeating bass—is exposed by notating it with slash chords.

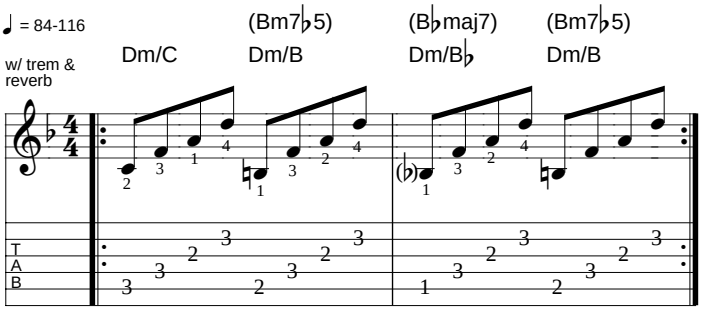
Generating fresh colors. Sometimes garden-variety triads and seventh chords simply sound too staid. Using slash chords, it's easy to create ear-tweaking progressions. **Ex. 3** consists of two simple elements: a two-note bass line (*C, B*♭) repeating below *D-C-B*♭*-C* triads. The result is a harmonically restless, yet rhythmically stable progression—an excellent backdrop for modal improvisation. Want to go there? For starters, try playing *D* Mixolydian (*D, E, F*♯*, G, A, B, C*) over *D*/*C*, and *C* Mixolydian (*C, D, E, F, G, A, B*♭) over both *C*/*B*♭ and *B*♭/*C*.

Here's why these modes work: *D* Mixolydian contains the notes in *D*/*C* (voiced here as *A, D,* and *F*♯ over *C*), and *C* Mixolydian contains the notes in both *C*/*B*♭ (*G, C,* and *E* over *B*♭) and *B*♭/*C* (*F, B*♭, and *D* over *C*). While the *creative* aspects of improvisation can't be reduced to formulas, the relationship between harmony and scales is logical and systematic. If you're patient and curious, you can map this relationship on your fretboard.

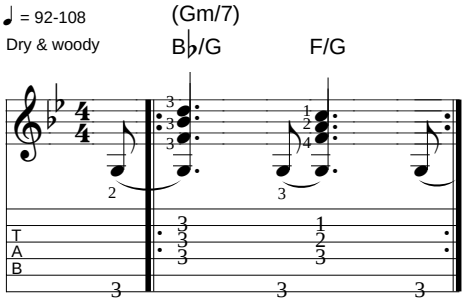
BACK TRACKING

For background on **triads**, read "Mapping Triads" in the Mar. '99 *GP*. To learn more about the **Mixolydian** mode read "Modes in a Nutshell" and "Mixolydian Magic" in the Oct. '99 and Dec. '99 issues.

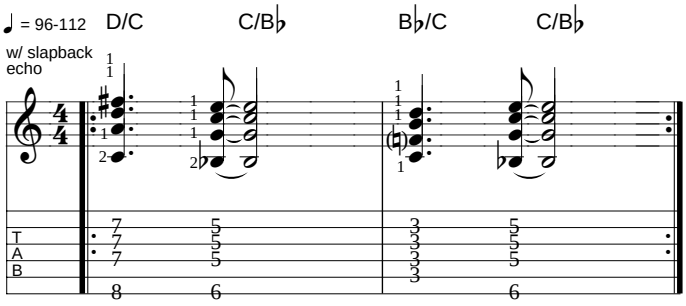
Ex. 1

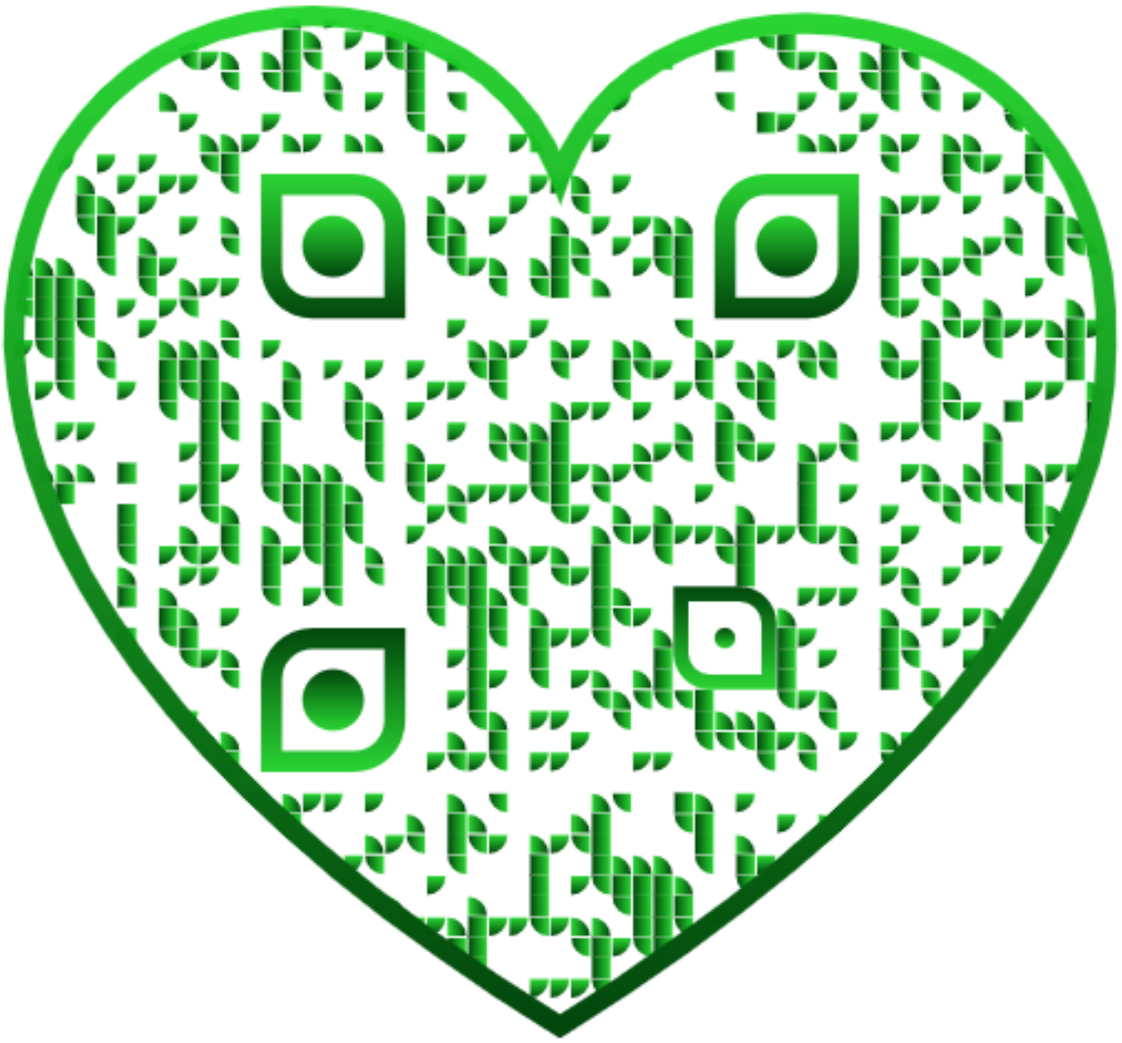


Ex. 2



Ex. 3





The slash-chord machine. You can approach slash chords intuitively or you can generate them scientifically using this two-step process:

• Grab a favorite triad on either of the two highest string sets (on the third, second, and first strings, or fourth, third, and second strings).

• Starting from the triad's root, play an ascending or descending chromatic scale below it. First establish the triad-over-root sound—this is your sonic baseline. As you advance through the chromatic scale, pause and listen to each note against the triad. Some combinations (such as *C*/*D*♭ or *C*/*E*♭) will send children and small creatures running from the room, and some combinations will be impossible to play without tapping the bass note with your picking hand. Write down the combinations that work for you musically *and* physically. Once you've sorted out the useful sounds and playable grips, you'll have some cool new options to explore.